

Genuine Game Poachers Bad Enough, But Windmill Shooters Much Worse

By Monte Noelke

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MERTZON — The legal deer season in the Shortgrass Country is, at this writing, 120 hours old. Normally, this would mean the week of peace between poachers and the poached upon was in effect but for some strange reason, there lingers among landowners a grudge that shows little sign of moderating.

Always in the past, by the time the licensed hunters' gun barrels were carbonizing up around the muzzles, and the multitudes of fresh-painted beer cans had lost their factory sheen, the antics of the car-door and sealed-beam set were forgotten in the melee. But this year, many shortgrassers continued to bear a strong resentment toward the small minority of jolly gunmen who amuse themselves during the off season by blasting practically any type of four-legged creature that crosses their path.

To some extent, the same attitude is developing on this outfit. Our sheep and cow wranglers haven't come right out and said so, but nevertheless it's becoming more apparent after every head-lighting safari that the hands are beginning to resent such trifles as the nocturnal sportsmen's use of the ranch buildings as a backstop for their midnight shoot-outs. At the same time, the land-bound prickly pear grubbers, who camp out in pastures, are showing some impatience with the poachers. It's safe to assume that after each late, late evening barrage, the popularity of the wandering gamesmen falls a full 10 points among the pear jockeys.

This undertone of animosity is not entirely the fault of the modern after-dark sporting element. As far back as 10 years ago, the poachers were making a pest of themselves by doing just about everything wrong — from breaking newly weaned calves out of the corral to turning over quail traps that were hidden away out in the bushes where no one had the slightest excuse to tread.

If anything, the trespassers of that earlier day and age were even more aggravating than those of the present. They were the worst in the world when it came to breaking both the state law and the code of the rangelands. They committed all kinds of annoyances, such as jumping the duck season a week or two even though they knew full well we were baiting the tanks so it wouldn't take \$40 worth of shotgun shells to get a mess of birds; or charging into a pasture full of turkey and deliberately picking out all the young birds that we had been saving to catch with the dogs.

Those oldtime poachers had less sporting blood in their veins than a black crow that finds a little lamb frozen to the ground. They were nothing but trouble. In fact, a time or two when they became extremely lawless, game wardens grew so thick out here that a man feared to tear down a sparrow's nest under the eaves of the barn without first checking with his Congressman.

Of course it's common knowledge that the public image of all generations of poachers has been twisted in a horrible unjust picture. For example, these starlight riflemen have been unfairly linked with the open range beer can blasters and the widely denounced telephone insulator and sign shooting element.

In some cases the false charges have gone so far as to accuse these misunderstood gamesmen of such undignified behavior as breaking locks of gates and tearing down a few hundred yards of netwire fence. But in general, neither the law nor the ranchers have ever caught many full blood poachers committing these acts.

To bring peace between poachers and ranchers is going to take time and, most of all, a broad educational program among the ranchers to give them a better understanding of the poachers' position. In turn, the cowhands must be trained to hold up better under headlights and gunfire.

When this is accomplished, the imagined menace of the poachers will be over, and life on the prairie will again be every bit as peaceful as it is on a weather barge anchored in the middle of the Arctic Ocean.